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Adventures in the Screen Trade.pdf

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BOOK REVIEWS

William Goldman,
*Adventures in the Screen Trade:
A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting*
(Warner Books 1983) (Ian Gallacher, rev'r)

Book Review

Hollywood to Classroom: Writing Advice from a Master Storyteller

A review of William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (Warner Books 1983), 594 pp.

Ian Gallacher*

William Goldman's book—half memoir, half screenwriting primer—is not an obvious choice of book for legal writers to read. It was written in 1983 (although still in print and available on Amazon.com if not at your local bookstore), and it's about . . . well . . . screenwriting, not brief writing. Add in the sometimes raunchy language that might put some off and the parts about the movie business that don't relate to writing, and it might seem that Goldman's book doesn't have much to say to us.

But consider this: Goldman wrote the original screenplay for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*,¹ wrote the adapted screenplays for such films as *All The President's Men*² and *A Bridge Too Far*,³ and wrote the original book and the adapted screenplay for *The Princess Bride*.⁴ Surely the man who thought up that plot and dialog must have something to offer legal writers.

Oh yes. Even if you're not fascinated by his painful and funny (and that's quite a trick) description of a life in movies, Goldman tells us a lot about writing that is directly applicable to what we do and, in fact, what all writers do. The points he makes might seem familiar, but that in itself is a revelation: we say that good writing is good writing in whatever form we might encounter it, but to see the proof of that is fascinating and valuable.

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1 William Goldman, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, directed by George Roy Hill (1969: 20th Century Fox).

2 William Goldman, *All the President's Men*, directed by Alan J. Pakula (1976: Warner Bros.).

3 William Goldman, *A Bridge Too Far*, directed by Richard Attenborough (1977: United Artists).

4 William Goldman, *The Princess Bride*, directed by Rob Reiner (1987: 20th Century Fox).

Other books about writing might be more directly intended for legal writers, but few are as insightful, and not one is as entertaining, as this one.

The book is divided into four sections: “Hollywood Realities,” in which Goldman discusses the process of making movies and the roles people play in that process; “Adventures,” the autobiographical part of the book, devoted to some movies he wrote and some movies in which his work wasn’t used; “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,” which includes the entire screenplay and a brutally honest analysis of its strengths and weaknesses; and “Da Vinci,” a section in which Goldman takes an original short story (which is included), a screenplay based on the story he wrote as an exercise for this book, and the comments of various representatives of the movie-making process to show how they would try to turn the short story into a movie.

Scattered throughout the book are nuggets that legal writers can take to heart. Goldman’s description of the exhausted studio executive facing a stack of scripts on a Friday night—looking through each to see if it “look[s] like a screenplay,”⁵ but who, once he (always a man: this was 1983, after all) starts to read, wants to love each script—could be written, with only minor changes, to describe a judge’s reaction to a weekend’s reading. And his observation that “writers are most brilliant at . . . finding reasons not to get to [writing]”⁶ is a comforting reminder that we all face the same demon, these days in the guise of the blank screen and the blinking insertion point, and we all—no matter our genre or our level of experience—try to avoid it in the same way.

Goldman believes that “screenplays should be written with as much speed as possible—and with even more deliberation,”⁷ and explains this paradox by describing his work on *Butch Cassidy*, which began in the late 1950s and continued through eight years of research until, in 1966, he wrote the first draft of the screenplay in four weeks.⁸ That insight, and Goldman’s succinct encapsulation of it, is a valuable one for legal writers. We shouldn’t start writing until we’re sure of what we’re going to write about, it says, but when we start the drafting stage we should try to write that first draft as quickly as we can. Goldman doesn’t suggest for a second that the first draft will be the last—the book is full of accounts of scripts that went through numerous revisions and alterations—but his advice of

5 William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* 106 (Warner Books 1983).

6 *Id.* at 200.

7 *Id.* at 123.

8 *Id.* at 123–24.

writing in an intense burst, thereby capturing the creative passion on the page, has resonance for all writers.

Most importantly, perhaps, Goldman tells us that “screenplays are structure,” and that though “nifty dialog” and characters that come to life can help, “if the structure is unsound, forget it.”⁹ He illustrates the point by writing about a scene in *Butch Cassidy* that didn’t make the final version of the film. The scene was written to demonstrate one of the reasons he wrote the film: “[I]t seemed like a wonderful vehicle to say something about our lack of knowledge, about our hopeless and terrible and, alas, enduring permanent loneliness . . .”¹⁰ (Teachers could devote an entire class to appreciating the rhythm of Goldman’s writing in that sentence. Aside from being fascinating, this book is beautifully written.)

But when the scene was shot it didn’t work, so it was cut. “The moment is certainly valid. I just didn’t write it properly. I didn’t know how. Still don’t.”¹¹ Goldman’s willingness to kill one of his darlings¹² in order to maintain the movie’s structure is a crucial lesson for any legal writer who wants to keep a pet argument in a brief, even though it disrupts the narrative flow and structure of the argument.

Goldman has written other books about Hollywood,¹³ another about Broadway,¹⁴ and many books of fiction,¹⁵ and they’re all interesting, entertaining, and wonderfully written. But any writer, including any legal writer, who wants to learn from a master craftsman could do much worse than reading this book carefully. It’s an entertaining master class that will teach important lessons about writing while being appropriate beach reading. There aren’t many books about which you can say that.

9 *Id.* at 460.

10 *Id.* at 286.

11 *Id.* at 457.

12 *Id.* Goldman attributes the line to William Faulkner; I thought it was written by Arthur Quiller-Couch. See Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Writing* 203 (Cambridge U. Press 1916). It’s a valid piece of advice, whoever said it.

13 E.g. William Goldman, *The Big Picture: Who Killed Hollywood? And Other Essays* (Applause 2001)

14 William Goldman, *The Season: A Candid Look at Broadway* (Limelight 1969).

15 E.g. William Goldman, *Marathon Man* (Delacorte Press 1974).

